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Emanuela Guano

Taxpayers, Thieves, and the State: Fiscal Citizenship in Contemporary Italy

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Introduction

Whoever cheats on taxes is a triple thief. He [*sic*] is a thief because he subtracts resources from the community where he lives. These resources won't be destined to schools, hospitals, and streets. He is twice a thief because other citizens must pay more [taxes] because of him. He is a triple thief because he uses the Country's infrastructures for free. Evading taxes is like robbing; better, it's a robbery without risks: politicians keep lookout [as one steals].¹

Thus Beppe Grillo, Italy's most popular, if controversial, stand-up comedian, political activist, and blogger, recapitulates the issue of fiscal evasion: a problem that, in this country, is particularly acute. Indeed, Grillo's Italy is populated by a multitude of "thieves"—that is, individuals who take advantage of the common good without contributing to it. According to a EU.R.E.S report issued in 2007, about 60% of craftsmen evade taxes, and so do 45% of all professionals. Between 2004 and 2007, tax evasion tripled among business owners, even as it showed a moderate decrease among barbers, hair dressers, maids, and *badanti* (caregivers for the elderly).

Having fewer ways of dodging a fiscal pressure that is frequently described as among the highest in Europe,² Italy's fixed-income classes are often painfully aware that the burden of stemming the country's whopping public debt falls largely on their shoulders. This is an overwhelming responsibility, indeed: after its public debt soared to 1,761.191 billion euros (Banca d'Italia Eurosystem 2010:2), in 2010 Italy earned a seat among the PIIGS—that is, the European Union countries at risk of default:

Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain. Given the predicament of Italy's public finances, the issue of who pays taxes and who does not is bound to stir sanguine discussions in the Italian public sphere.

Online newspaper forums, for example, are frequent sounding boards for citizens' concerns. "No voting rights for repeat evaders" was the (remarkably popular) proposal a reader made in February 2009 from the online site of *L'Espresso*, Italy's foremost progressive political magazine.³ Only a few months later, a similarly intense debate was sparked by another reader's suggestion of instituting a tax fraud hotline with a reward of 50 euros for each call plus monthly prizes for informers.⁴ This stance on evasion is corroborated by the rhetoric of Italian leftist parties and coalitions. Between 2006 and 2008, a slogan by the center-left government led by Romano Prodi, "*pagare tutti per pagare meno*" (if everybody pays, taxes will decrease), spoke mostly to the fixed-income classes that, since at least the 1970s, have been by and large bearing the brunt of fiscal policies that, in spite of seemingly strict regulations, create comfortable loopholes for the wealthy (Cantaro 1990; Ferrera 1984).

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, such a strong resentment against evaders is fully matched by the anti-tax sentiments of not only entrepreneurs and professionals, but also and above all the small business owners who constitute a pillar of the Italian economy (Blim 1990; Shin and Agnew 2009). It is the latter's views that often find an echo in the highly mediatized rhetoric of conservative politicians.⁵ In recent years, populists like multi-millionaire Silvio Berlusconi and Northern League leader Umberto Bossi, whose motto is "*pagare meno per pagare tutti*" (if taxes decrease, everybody will pay), have frequently invited their voters to enact *sciopero fiscale* (fiscal strike), thus contributing to legitimizing fiscal evasion not as a crime, but rather as a tool of political struggle against an unjust state.⁶

Competing stances such as these point to the centrality of the fiscal contract to the Italian social and political imaginary. Drawing on research conducted from 2002 through 2009,⁷ in this paper I explore how debates about tax evasion and just distribution provide Italian citizens with a medium to keep assaying their rights and duties vis-à-vis the state as well as each other. I contend that, while interwoven with anti-tax sentiments, representations of the fiscal contract may also be infused with nostalgia for a Keynesian state that, in Italy, was never realized. I conclude by suggesting that the modern Italian state is implicated in the divisiveness of society as well as in a competitive model of citizenship: one whereby social categories that mistrust the state even as they lay claim to its resources may cast each other as an impediment to the fulfillment of their respective rights.⁸

Fuzzy State Logic

As the past participle of the verbs *essere* and *stare* (to be and to stand) the Italian word for “state”—*stato*—reflects a reification (Herzfeld 2004:73) whereby an entity that is fluidly embodied in relationships, practices, places, people, and things (Aretxaga 2006, Bourdieu 1999; Gupta 1995; Taussig 1993) seeks to conceal the fuzziness of its boundaries through the fiction of its separation from society (Mitchell 1999, Taussig 1993). This fiction of detachment rests on, even as it reproduces, claims to rationality and universalism (Herzfeld 1993; Parsons 1951; Weber 1978).

Regardless of such claims, however, the promise of citizens’ equality before the Italian state remains a chimera. Ever since Italy’s 19th century unification as a top-down bourgeois revolution (Gramsci [1971] 1999:104-106), Italian governments have frequently relied on influence peddling and clientelism in order to bolster their often precarious stability (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999; Ginsborg 1990; Ferrera 1996;

Konig-Archibugi 2003; Mack Smith 1997, McCarthy 1995; Tullio-Altan 2000, Zinn 2002). Depending on corporativism in order to exercise its control over society, in the early 20th century Italy's Fascist administration further intensified the practice of patronage (Roberts 1979:298)—and so did, after democracy had been restored, the Christian Democratic party (DC) that was hegemonic for much of the Cold War era (Wagner Pacifici 1986:30). In the early 1990s, when a barrage of corruption scandals led the DC to its demise, the new parties of the Second Republic eagerly picked up the baton. To date, corporativism and clientelism continue unabated, and the traffic in favors, moneys, and votes between politicians and various sectors of Italian society is as thick as ever (Ginsborg 2003; Pardo 1996; 2000).⁹

Deeply entangled with the pretense of universalism, the rationality of the modern Italian state is just as contested. Few, in Italy, ignore that the country's complex, and often malfunctioning, bureaucratic archipelago has largely been proliferated in order to provide politicians with posts and resources for friends, kin, and clients (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999; Tarrow 1977; Van Kersberger 1995). Even as it keeps feeding into the country's public debt, the unstoppable growth of offices and positions has contributed to inflating the processes citizens are subjected to in their dealings with the administration (Foot 2003:98). Thus, small business owner Amalia reports:

I had to renew [a permit], the Sampierdarena office is usually open on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday from 9am till 2pm. I decide to go on a Thursday. ... when I get there, they tell me "lady, since it's summer we only work on Mondays and Tuesdays, we no longer do Thursdays." I go back the following Monday, it takes me one hour forty-five minutes in traffic. I get there, take a number, and wait in line for fifty minutes. When it's my turn, I walk in... and they say "here is the form... fill it in and turn it in at [our downtown office] ... I drive downtown, it takes me half an hour just to find parking, and when I get to the office it's packed. I was there about an hour, when it's my turn [the employee] takes my form, puts a stamp on it, and says "you can go." I say, "Excuse me, what's happening with this form now?"

They say “it’s going back to the Sampierdarena office” Do you understand? They made me go downtown because the stamp was downtown, but the form goes back to Sampierdarena! Everybody was in this office for the same reason. Why didn’t they give the stamp to that loser [in Sampierdarena]? They had to create a job for somebody’s nephew [*nipote*]... You see how much time and money this bureaucracy costs us, how much it cost me?

Amalia’s grievances against the high costs of self-proliferating bureaucracies are echoed by small business owner Andrea. Just like Amalia, Andrea resents what he perceives as an arbitrary appropriation of time and money at the hands of the public administration. Just to name one: every year, Andrea and his landlord have to register their lease with the local administration. This impost costs them a whopping €200 each; unlike other taxes, however, it does not even provide him with any services in return. To make things worse, each time Andrea has to run an errand like this, he has to close his store for hours on end. Spending half a day in a crowded municipal office costs him dearly in terms of lost business. The moneys that go into supporting Italy’s bloated bureaucracy--Andrea concludes--would be better spent elsewhere:

Whenever I make some black money [*faccio del nero*], I immediately re-circulate it by going out for dinner or buying something... This is good for the economy. If all [the money] goes into taxes, there is no money circulating, and everybody is poorer.

Many Italians share Andrea and Amalia’s frustration at being caught between the stern instrumental rationality of an administration that conducts its business “without regard for person” (Weber 1978: 978) on one hand, and the equally compelling types of logic informing their everyday lives on the other.¹⁰ The self-employed, in particular, resent an etatization (Verdery 1996:40) of their time and resources that defies neoliberal principles of efficient self-management and competitiveness (Ong 2006:4). At times, this tension may provide aggrieved taxpayers with a moral justification for an illegal activity such as tax evasion (Pardo

1996:20). The latter, as Andrea's case exemplifies, can thus be conceptualized as restoring the beneficial primacy of the market's invisible hand in the face of an unreasonable state keen on freezing citizens' time and money (Maurer 2007). And yet, this stance is hardly alien from the contemporary state's own logic.¹¹

In recent years, the sentiments voiced by business owners and the self-employed have been incorporated into the increasingly neoliberalized, and increasingly flexible (Gledhill 2004) policies on tax fraud and evasion put forth by Italy's conservative governments. In 2003, for example, Berlusconi's government issued a complete fiscal amnesty (*condono tombale*): tax evaders could opt for paying a fine and be exempted from more serious legal consequences. The import of the condono penalty was a real bargain compared to the amounts that many had evaded. Ironically, several of those who had been meticulous with their tax returns ended up paying the fee, too. Accountants back then were informing their clients that, by not requesting the condono, they would raise a red flag in the eyes of the finanza police, thus triggering an audit. Since the common belief is that an audit inevitably brings about fines even in the face of the most transparent fiscal conduct, many professionals and business owners decided not to take the risk. Hence, while egregious tax evaders got away with the financial equivalent of a slap on their hands, many of those who had complied were penalized twice: once for paying taxes they could have evaded, and then once again for having to pay a penalty they did not deserve. If fiscal amnesties reconfigure tax minimizers as law-abiding and rational economic actors (Maurer 2007:128), yet another consequence of Berlusconi's condono was to force many fiscally compliant citizens into choosing between what they perceived as state extortion on one hand, and the risks involved in being wrongfully cast as evaders on the other.

Sandra, a street antique dealer who used to pride herself in her fiscal integrity, was one of the taxpayers who begrudgingly applied for a condono they did not need. Even though she had always paid her taxes in full, she was still afraid of an audit: “the state is the state, and when they come after you they have to make it worth their while,” she said. Caught in the incongruities of a self-contradicting state, Sandra blamed herself for her naiveté as a law-abiding citizen: “Whenever there is a norm I have to follow it. What can I say, I am an idiot!” What upset her even more was that the amnesty was meant to benefit the great evaders at the expenses of everybody else: honest taxpayers like her.

Knowing Sandra’s probity, I was all the more surprised when, in 2008, she informed me she had opted for what, borrowing from a conservative rhetoric she otherwise abhorred, she defined as *disobbedienza fiscale*: that is, she returned her business license, thus becoming invisible to the internal revenues services even as she continued to sell her goods at antique fairs. Indeed, Sandra’s decision was a “moment of resistance” (Roitman 2005:8) driven by resentment as well as necessity. Mirroring the overall economic decline of the middle and lower sectors of Italian society, in 2008 Sandra’s diminutive business had been doing poorly; in 2007 she had earned 50% less than in 2006, and in 2006 her pre-tax earnings were down by € 10,000 compared to 2005. In order to make ends meet, Sandra had had to cut down on her already frugal lifestyle, and had been taking loans against her mother’s pension of approximately € 900 monthly. Even these measures were no longer enough, though. Her revenues were at an all-time low, and yet her taxes had just tripled. Due to the stricter fiscal policies implemented by Prodi’s center-left government, what she now owed in taxes for the current trimester no longer amounted to € 1,000, but rather to a whopping € 3,500.

Just as importantly, Sandra's decision stemmed from the realization that those illegal vendors who do not have a license and hence pay no taxes are not only subject to few controls, but they also have it a lot easier financially. Known as *abusivi*, illegal vendors are rarely penalized by fair organizers, many of whom do not check the vendors' credentials: "as long as you pay the rental fees, [they] don't care." The organizers' indifference to the normative is such, Sandra told me, that

at the Pindarolo¹² fair last Sunday... the *abusivi* took the best spots; those with a license instead were all piled up in a tiny little corner. I asked [the fair organizer] why those guys have all that space and we don't, and they told me, well, it's too late now, we already gave away all the spots. I say, I pay taxes and I want a better spot like everybody else. "Sorry, there is nothing we can do." So I pick up my cell phone and call the fiscal police [by dialing] 117, and they tell me "look, we have few patrols, we can't go check now." They keep telling you... that the fiscal police has the duty to monitor tax frauds and protect citizens' rights, and yet "no" they tell me, "look madam, what you can do is to write a grievance letter, sign it, and send it to the municipality." So, with my license and all, all I could do was to spend the day perched at the edge of the fair, while the *abusivi* had their place in the sun.

Compounded with the inability to cope with an unreasonable fiscal pressure, Sandra's awareness of how free-riders (be they of the big- or small-fish variety) were consistently left off the hook tilted her scale towards fiscal disobedience. She canceled her business license, even as she continued to sell her goods at antique fairs. After much study, she managed to create a barrage of counterfeit documents to be used in case of a *finanza* raid, which she showed me with a mix of amusement and pride: indeed, as spaces of danger, the margins of the state also foster creativity (Das and Poole 2004:19). Besides, the risks involved in being caught, in Sandra's case, were somewhat limited--especially if weighed against the costs of fiscal probity: "if they catch me [selling without a license], at most they'll give me a fine," she said. Paying a € 300 penalty when, and most importantly if, the police ever found her would be still preferable to paying thousands in taxes, anyway.

Like Sandra, many of the disgruntled self-employed taxpayers with whom I talked did not regard evasion as a crime, but rather as a justifiable form of resistance in the face of a state that they perceive as constantly violating its own obligations—such as the pledge of pursuing fairness in taxation by imposing the same level of legibility (Scott 1998) on all citizens alike. As the owner of a small store put it:

You know, what happens is that the state, behaving the way it does, turns the citizen into a thief, because you cannot afford to pay too many taxes [...] while others don't pay any at all. So, one says "why should I pay taxes when [politicians] are ripping me and are unfair?"

This logic is clear. The social contract of modern citizenship is based on the notion that citizens surrender part of their wealth to the state through their taxes, and, in return, the state guarantees rights and public services (Roche 2002:76). Hence, not only is the state expected to ensure that the wealth it has appropriated is redistributed in the form of adequate services and the protection of citizens' rights, but it also has to make certain that the fiscal pressure is in and of itself equitable. After all, the belief that the exchange between taxpayers and the state is fair is fundamental in supporting the latter's consent to taxation (Martin, Merotra, and Prasad 2009: 18). *Pace* Grillo and his supporters, when the state is perceived as violating this contract, some citizens—those who can afford it--may cease to interpret fiscal evasion as a "robbery," and they may refuse to see themselves as "thieves." Evasion to them may become a logical response to, or even a defense against, a predatory and unfair state. Not all citizens, however, have access to the same options in their struggle for fairness.

Fixed-income Citizens/Consumers and *Scontrino* Politics

At least since the late 20th century, the actual laxity of the Italian state in matters of tax enforcement has often gone hand in hand with the proliferation of regulations formally meant to detect the revenues that are hidden by professionals, business owners, and the self-employed (De Cecco and Pedone 1995:298). In 1983, Socialist Minister of Finances Rino Formica sought to hamper fiscal evasion by approving a normative that required all businesses to install fiscal cash registers on their premises. Such devices would record all transactions, issuing receipts (*scontrini fiscali*) that attest to the fiscal transparency of the purchase. Customers, in turn, would have to request these documents and exhibit them at *finanza* (fiscal police) checkpoints within a certain distance from the business. By embedding an official record into the everyday practice of citizens, state officials sought to pass on the work of surveillance to civilians, thus proliferating the labor of domination (Bourdieu 1999:71) and giving this surveillance a potentially capillary outreach that would not have been possible otherwise. Not only did this norm further complicate the fiction of the separation between state and society, but it also subjected the implementation of the rational-universalistic principles of the regulatory state to the everyday life choices and costs-benefits calculations of individual citizens. Just as importantly, it also turned a structural issue into an object of minute daily contentions—though highly significant ones for all the parties involved.

Until 2004, those patrons who were caught without a receipt were liable of receiving a fine. Lucia was one of them. One Saturday evening, as she was leaving a restaurant with her friends, she was approached by two nicely dressed young men who made small talk about the quality of the food. Most Italians have strong opinions when it comes to food, Lucia says, and she is certainly one of them. As soon as she volunteered some information on her dining experience, the plain clothes officers

flashed their badges and requested the receipt. Since at that time she had accepted to forego the document in return for a small discount, she had to pay a fine. She felt stupid, she told me, for being so easily tricked into confessing her infraction. However, she felt even worse when she realized how she had been complicitous in a practice that was not only illegal, but also went against her own interests as a diligent taxpayer.

Even though nowadays patrons who do not have the receipt are no longer liable to be fined, Lucia has become much more careful. After each purchase, she usually insists on obtaining the receipt, regardless of the amount of the charge: “I’ll just stand in their way and insist till they pull [the receipt] out. And if they don’t, fine by me: I’ll call the fiscal police, and then we’ll see.” I do not think Lucia ever called the police (after all, she has a hunch that finanza officers are not likely to heed such trivial requests). However, on more than one occasion I saw her argue with reluctant shopkeepers as she requested a *scontrino*: a practice that she regards as both her right as a taxpayer, and her duty as a citizen. The reason for Lucia’s insistence is not just a clear, though abstract, vision of what is right and what is wrong. Rather, she feels she has a very personal stake in the struggle against tax evasion. Lucia is a retired school teacher who, after paying 28% of her pension in taxes, lives on a monthly allowance of about €1,200. Like many Italians on fixed income, she is extremely sensitive to the issue of tax fraud: “every tax euro that is evaded,” she says, “is a tax euro that I will have to pay out of my own pocket.”

Lucia’s sentiments are shared by many, and so is her militant attitude when it comes to obtaining a receipt. Since 2008, for example, citizens who witness an episode of fiscal evasion have the option of reporting it on *evasori.info*, a website that shows a map of Italy with balloons pointing to each site where an evasion has

happened over the previous 24 hours. The site also provides the exact time, the business category, and the import of each infraction.¹³ As it fails to impose legibility (Scott 1989) on large sectors of Italian society, the regulatory state comes across as unable, or unwilling, to monitor fiscal fraud and evasion. *Evasori.info*, instead, tracks the practice of evasion as it keeps happening, moment by moment, all over the country, in a denunciation that encourages citizens to be more vigilant and do what is in their power to stamp out evasion—that is, request the *scontrini* at each opportunity.

In the face of such capillary militancy, however, evasion continues undeterred. Every now and then, even a righteous person like Lucia may have to close an eye. Lucia's hairdresser, for example, has a habit of handing out doctored receipts. Each time she issues a receipt, the hairdresser will only report the styling, which amounts to a fraction of the actual price, and she will instruct Lucia on what to tell the *finanza* officers who may be lurking on the premises. In return, the hairdresser will give Lucia a discount. Lucia got used to this small cunning, and does not object to it. After all, she has known her hairdresser for thirty years now. Not only does she trust her unconditionally with her hair, but she also tells her everything about herself, her life, and her family: an intimacy that her hairdresser is happy to reciprocate, and that cannot be comfortably interrupted by fiscal talk.

Yet, intimacy is not the only factor in establishing complicity around the practice of fiscal evasion. Occasionally, what tilts the patron's scale towards not insisting on a receipt is a quick calculation of costs and benefits. Some physicians, for example, customarily offer a deep discount to those patients who do not request the receipt. Similarly high discounts are issued by home repair and construction businesses, among others, in return for their clients' complicity. "When the discount is substantial," Lucia observes, "it is hard to say 'no'." After all, her pension is too

low to afford her the luxury of demanding fiscal probity from all of her fellow citizens.

With all the dilemmas that riddle the seemingly trivial choice of whether to request a receipt or not, Lucia's considerations are emblematic of the complexities and the tensions that face Italians on a daily basis. While the rhetoric of North Atlantic neoliberalism posits the transformation of citizens into consumers (Canclini 2001), Italian consumers negotiating the boundary between state and market are enlisted in a practice of surveillance through which they never cease to be citizens with rights and especially duties vis-à-vis the state as well as each other. Each time they purchase goods or services, they have the option to take on multiple subject positions: they can choose to be accomplices in fiscal evasion, or, alternatively, foot soldiers of state surveillance. Either way, they become the temporary arbiters of a triangulated relationship between themselves, their providers of goods and services, and the state. To those who feel that they have a stake in the correct functioning of the revenue system, this possibility may give a temporary feeling of empowerment in the face of dynamics that are otherwise beyond their reach. A banal decision such as requesting a receipt, then, is a political act in a struggle for fiscal equity that the regulatory state seems to be losing only too often.

Solidarity, Interrupted

The legitimacy of a taxation system depends not just on the perception of its fairness in harnessing resources, but also on distribution: that is, how the state employs the revenues it collects. Framed in terms of benefits for the collectivity, this use includes funding disaster aid. When, in April 2009, a powerful earthquake ravaged the Abruzzo region, a debate immediately ensued over how to help with a

reconstruction that was going to cost billions of euros. Spontaneous fund-raising efforts started all over the peninsula. Soon enough, though, such strong emotional response became riddled with perplexities. The dust had barely settled on the ruins of Abruzzo when voices began to rise questioning the opportunity to make donations. This is when Loredana, a teacher and a usually highly compassionate individual, informed me that she would not send any charity to the victims. She had already donated a few euros through text-messaging, and that was it: “*basta così*—that’s enough,” she stated. “I am sorry for the people from l’Aquila, but aid and reconstruction are the responsibility of the state.” Her sister-in-law Rita chimed in: “This is what we pay taxes for, isn’t it?” The trigger for Loredana and Rita’s change of heart, they told me, had been an editorial in Genoa’s *Il Secolo XIX* daily, which they both read regularly. Writing about the Italian state’s responsibilities vis-à-vis its citizens, philosophy professor Mauro Barberis had declared he would no longer contribute to charity efforts; he also exhorted his readers to do the same. This is how Barberis explained his decision:

The problem is not that I, along with millions of salaried workers and retirees, do not want to pay. The problem is that we are already paying. We are already paying for Abruzzo, just like we have already paid for [the victims of previous earthquakes in] Friuli, Irpinia, and Belice; I would not be surprised if we were still paying for Messina’s 1908 earthquake.¹⁴

In all of these instances, Barberis argued, fixed-income taxpayers’ moneys had been misused (if not downright embezzled) by negligent or corrupt state representatives. Why keep paying, then? Though undoubtedly provocative, Barberis’ stance was not unique. In fact, among the first to raise this very same question was Sicilian journalist Giancarlo di Girolamo. Di Girolamo, whose bold statement on Facebook spread like wildfire over internet, wrote:

I am not giving a penny, because I already pay taxes. A lot of them. And these taxes already include the moneys for reconstruction, for aid, and for civil protection. And these moneys are always spent to do other things. And hence, each time the Civil Protection asks Italians for more money. And I say no. Let them ask the many outstanding evaders who crisscross our country's economy... I won't donate a penny for earthquake victims. And I don't want any charity if something happens to me. All I want is an efficient State that is not controlled by the cunning.¹⁵

Di Girolamo's declaration raised the question of what legitimates the state's appropriation of part of the citizens' wealth (Roitman 2005:12). His was, in the first place, a plea for a just and efficient Keynesian state. In the classic Keynesian social contract, citizens accept to pay high taxes in return for public services and social rights. In this paradigm, the acceptance of steep taxation levels and its model of diffuse solidarity are supported by the understanding that anyone may end up needing the safety net one helps subsidize through one's tax money (Ignatieff 1995:67). This type of state-mediated solidarity is the first casualty of North Atlantic neoliberal ideology. As citizens are inculcated the individualistic credo of self-management (Ong 2006:4), poverty and dependency become conceptualized as the fate that the irresponsible bring upon themselves (Harvey 2005; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003). Since the market is regarded as more efficient than the state at generating, managing, and distributing resources, neoliberal subjects become eager to renounce public services and entitlements in return for deep cuts in their taxes. Thus, the burden of succoring the needy falls on a civil society that is defined as that "supposedly autonomous space of individual freedom and voluntary association distinct from both the state and the market, located between the private and the public... where citizens can pursue the good life" (Wilder 1999:44).

Such ideology is hardly absent in Italy, where the fast growing *terzo settore* (third sector) of volunteer work has blended Catholic and socialist solidarity models

into a moral neoliberal imperative that posits itself as a humane alternative to the welfare administered by an allegedly cold and distant state (Muehlebach 2007). Yet, I contend that, whereas moral neoliberals may interpret a natural catastrophe like the Abruzzo earthquake as an opportunity for civil society to relieve the state from the burden of solidarity (or, vice-versa, to relieve citizens from the burden of dealing with the state), appeals such as Di Girolamo's posit a radically different type of social contract. Faced with the state's failure to collect and distribute citizens' revenues equitably, Di Girolamo, Barberis, and others are not inspired to advocate for a Tocqueville-style charitable associationism. On the contrary: interrupting solidarity is their way of calling the state to the duty of using taxpayers' moneys appropriately in order to guarantee citizens' social rights.¹⁶

Keynes Envy

The history of social rights in contemporary Italy follows a discontinuous path that began in the 1950s, when occupational groups started pledging their electoral support in return for health care and retirement benefits (Koenig Archibugi 2003:102).¹⁷ This dynamic consolidated a corporative and clientelistic model (Ferrera 1996, Koenig-Archibugi 2003) whereby social rights reforms were often, in fact, entitlement programs targeting specific groups rather than society as a whole (Esping-Andersen 1990; Cantaro 1990). In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the plea for social rights took on a more aggressive form as the massive strikes of industrial workers became a common negotiation tool—a tool that was to be appropriated, a decade later, by public-sector white-collar employees (Pipan 1989). Indeed, the use of strikes in order to wrestle rights from reluctant employers and governments did much to expand the Italian welfare state (Franzosi 1995). On the other hand, however, the

measures taken in response to such emergencies were often driven by concerns about a government's stability and its key electorates rather than fairness and universalism (Cantaro 1999:86; Pipan 1989:13). Hence, the policies thus put into place afford core sectors of the labor force a protection that is often denied to most other citizens (Esping Andersen 1990: 27; Ferrera 1984:140 and 2000:168; see also Reyneri 1997). At times, the particularistic practices embedded in the Italian social state go beyond corporativism to extend entitlements to individuals who do not qualify for them. This is the case, for example, of the thousands of disability pensions that, since the 1970s, have been bestowed upon ineligible individuals in return for votes (Ferrera 1984:202). Dynamics such as these greatly contribute to the inconsistent distribution of public resources in Italian society.

Combined with the awareness that the very same middle classes that finance the welfare state are rarely among those who reap its benefits (Ferrera 1984:242-243), the perception of, and anxieties about, distributive unfairness mar the relationship between citizens and the state as well as among fellow citizens (Cantaro 1999:34-35). These sentiments become particularly acute when distribution takes on the form of services that, like unemployment benefits, health care, education, public housing, and child care (just to name a few) are not only tapped individually (Murphy and Nagel 2002:48), but whose provision is also regulated on the basis of factors such as income and occupational status: factors that establish formal differences in access and costs to the user (Ferrera 1984:245). Often, these disparities reflect an institutional attempt to establish a vertical distributive equity whereby sacrifices and benefits are allocated in proportion to citizens' income and needs (Murphy and Nagel 2002:13). Even in these cases, however, the lack of trust in the state may promote envious comparisons, or

even a racialized victimology (Holmes 2000:144) that feeds on the perception of distributive inequities.

In Italy, the suspicion that the state may be funneling taxpayers' money into the pockets of the "wrong" ethnic groups goes at least as far back as the mid twentieth century. This is when a Christian Democratic government created the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* (the Fund for Southern Italy) for the official sake of helping development in the South—but, as a matter of fact, as a tool for distributing lucrative contracts and other favors in return for votes and money (Foot 2003:153; Tullio Altan 2000:137). After several decades of scandals and public discontent, the cassa was finally abolished in 1992. The practice of squandering taxpayers' moneys, however, continued, and it kept feeding north Italians' conspiracy theories that blend facts with speculations and ethnic revanchism (Schneider 1998:2-3). If, indeed, weak national sentiments contribute to delegitimizing fiscal systems (Bourdieu 1999:60; Feldman and Slemrod 2009), and if the willingness to sacrifice part of one's wealth for the common good depends on one's feelings for the community of appurtenance (Lieberman 2009), it is also true that contentious forms of taxation and distribution may further undermine national cohesion and inclusiveness. Ever since its inception in the 1980s, Umberto Bossi's Northern League party has successfully capitalized on these sentiments, expanding its invectives against *Roma ladrona* (Rome the thief) and its southern clienteles (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001:13-14) to include more explicitly anti-immigrant opinions. Just like Bossi, various conservative representatives have become adept at tapping into citizens' concerns that their tax money may, indeed, benefit "other" social categories: not only, or not necessarily, Southern Italians (many of whom, after all, support Berlusconi's own party), but also, and most importantly,

Gypsies and immigrants, whom Berlusconi's media frequently stigmatize as professional thieves and violent criminals, and hence undeserving of welfare rights.

One of the Northern League's recent posters, for example, shows a small crowd waiting in front of a door, seemingly trying to access the public benefits listed in the caption: housing, employment, and health care.¹⁸ "Guess who is last?" the poster asks rhetorically. A stereotypical Chinese, a grotesque Gypsy woman with a baby in her arms, a bejeweled African man, and an Arab holding a dagger are shoving aside a helpless elderly man, who is the only white Italian in the line: hence, as the poster not so subtly suggests, the only one who should really be entitled to the benefits.

Since the 1980s, Italian right-wing parties such as the Northern League have increasingly questioned the extension of free health care (*mutua*) benefits to immigrants. In 2009, Italy's conservative government passed a law that enabled physicians in public health care facilities to report those illegal immigrants who seek their services. This decision drew the support of many of those who feel that extending rights to immigrants may curtail their own access to public services, even as it increases their taxes. What these tax-payers often find upsetting is the consideration that, due to their low income status, immigrants are frequently exempted from co-pays. As a the owner of a small firm put it,

I pay twice for *mutua*. I pay once [for public health care] through my taxes, and then I have to pay again whenever I go and book a visit [with a specialist]... When my wife had a car accident and was taken to the emergency room, she had to pay a *ticket* (co-pay). The Moroccan who rammed into her car, instead, was treated for free. This, I don't think is fair. He doesn't pay taxes, and on top of it he gets all health care services for free. Of course [he does]: I am paying it all for him!

The list of grievances against the alleged privileges of immigrants does not end with public health care services, though. Parents of young children trying to cope with the scarcity of daycare centers also frequently resent what they perceive as the preference accorded to immigrants. Due to their low income status, the latter are relatively more likely to gain admission, and may also stand a better chance of being exempted from tuition and other fees. This is what Alessia, a part-time white collar employee and the mother of a four year old, told me:

Just for the sake of keeping my son in a child care facility I have to pay 320 euros a month, whereas *extracomunitari* (non-EU immigrants) pay nothing. I spend 4.5 euros a day on lunch, and my son who eats next to nothing has to subsidize the others who eat a lot more and pay nothing. Besides, Italian children are put on a waiting list, while foreigners are immediately admitted.

As a former leftist and a Catholic who had been active in charitable organizations, Alessia had agonized for a while over what to make of her situation. Whichever way she looked at it, however, she still felt that the state was not being fair—especially since the daycare tuition cost her about half of her salary:

This is not right. I am not saying ‘leave [the children of immigrants] out,’ but [public daycare centers should] admit Italians first, and then create quotas for foreigners.

Alessia’s frustration is shared by many working mothers. Since the early 1990s, only approximately 6 % of all toddlers in Italy have had access to public daycare (Naldini 2003:159). This dearth of services bears witness to the extent to which the patriarchal and familist Italian state draws on women’s invisible and unpaid labor in order to avoid public investments in the care of the young and the elderly (Esping Andersen 1990; Ferrera 1996 and 2000; Naldini 2003; Schierup, Housen and Castles 2006). As women’s role as caregivers continues to be naturalized (Plesset 2006; Krause 2004; Yanagisako 2002), structural inequities in their social rights still

go largely undetected. On the other hand, little does it matter that, in their capacity as *badanti* (caregivers for the elderly), many immigrant women are taking up an essential role that the patriarchal state has never fulfilled, and that Italian women are struggling to juggle (Naldini 2003); regardless of their contribution to the host society, they are still targeted by a diffuse discontent that blames them for the scarcity of public services available to Italian families.

Since its inception, the Northern League party—for which Alessia nowadays casts her vote--has been adept at exploiting grievances such as hers (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001).¹⁹ As the Italian economy keeps deteriorating, high inflation rates, the fast disappearance of tenured employment (Molé 2008; 2010) and a stifling fiscal pressure have fuelled the malcontent of large segments of the middle- and working classes. Combined with the growing mistrust for a leftist political leadership that even many former progressive voters perceive, at best, as elitist and indifferent (ITANES 2009), and at worst as incompetent or downright corrupt, this scenario supports the sentiment that any concession towards immigrants may indeed be a betrayal perpetrated against “legitimate” (because tax-paying, Italian-born, and white) citizens.

In recent years, anthropologists have observed how ethnic minorities become scapegoats for the costs that global dynamics exact locally, even as nation-states fail to assuage the problems affecting their citizens (Appadurai 2006; Holmes 2000). Even though such dynamics are obviously at play in the Italian context, here the xenophobic discourse also emerges from a competitive relationship between disgruntled citizens, “their” state (the one to which they pay taxes, and by whose services they are frequently disappointed), and immigrants (who allegedly pay no taxes, and yet still receive some benefits).

In US neoliberal discourse, immigrants and the urban poor are frequently accused of taking advantage of the state at the expenses of taxpayers who would much rather renounce rights and services in return for deep tax cuts (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003). The Italian scenario, however, is somewhat different. Here, few would really question the need for public services: just like in other Western European democracies, in Italy the perception of the relationship between taxation and citizens' rights is still pervasive (Guyer 1992). The disappointment, instead, is caused by the broken promise of Keynesianism: that is, the failure to honor a social contract whereby citizens consent to aggressive fiscal policies in return for adequate public services and social rights (Ignatieff 1995).²⁰

Thus Paolo, a formerly progressive lawyer, complained to me that, even though he pays about 60% of his revenues in taxes, he still had to chip in and buy equipment for his daughter's school—aren't public schools the responsibility of the state, which he subsidizes profusely, anyway? And when he goes to the doctor or rides the bus he has to pay again, too, even though he already paid for these services through his taxes:

No, look, even the Soviet Union was better [than contemporary Italy]: they would take all the money you made, but in return they would give you everything you needed: a home, free health care, food, a car, and gas. Here, instead, they take our money in return for nothing.

His tax money, he concluded, "is used to upholster the armchairs of politicians, and [politicians] give away whatever is left in charity for immigrants." As fiscal pressure remains high even in the face of the quick erosion of social rights and the state's failure to deliver satisfactory services, frustrated taxpayers like Paolo are easily tempted to blame their woes on immigrants along with the corrupt, inefficient government that seems to grant foreigners rights it denies its own citizens.

Racism, as Etienne Balibar suggested, is a “relationship to the other that is mediated by the state” (1991:15). Indeed, racism is deeply embedded in Italian immigration laws and practices. Yet, the role of the Italian state in mediating racism goes beyond the formulation and enforcement of discriminatory laws. In fact, this role also involves the state’s own lack of credibility and its consequent inability to persuasively defend the few social rights it grants to immigrants.²¹ This lack of legitimacy leaves ample room for dismissals of what conservatives call “leftist goody-goody-ism (*buonismo della sinistra*)” in the face of any attempt to extend a safety net to immigrants.

Conclusion: It Takes Three to Tango

In this paper, I explored some of the ways in which Italian citizens articulate the tension between the state’s pledge of fiscal fairness and distributive universalism on one hand, and the seemingly capricious application of rights, duties, and entitlements on the other. Drawing on an ethnography of the current discourse on fiscal probity, evasion, and the social rights, I approached fiscal citizenship as an emergent relational category that is constantly negotiated along and across the split between the rhetoric of equity on one hand, and its actual denial on the other. I then suggested that the fiscal contract in Italy is perceived and practiced as inherently unstable, marred as it is by a *sui generis* specter of comparison (Anderson 1998) among citizens: a rift that is contextually modulated along the lines separating the salaried classes from the self-employed, North Italians from Southerners, and native white Italians from immigrants—just to name a few. This antagonism, I argued, is mediated by the state.

“Tutti i cittadini sono uguali davanti alla legge:” all citizens are equal before the law, reads article three of the Italian constitution. And yet, few Italians would argue that this principle is consistently applied, especially when it comes to the state’s role in harnessing and distributing resources. As one retiree put it,

The state should be like a family father: I give him my money and he should administer it for my sake and for the sake of all. Hence, in practice the state should take care of my needs whenever I cannot afford to do something on my own; I am thinking of the health care system, or maintaining the streets. After all I give him money to do these things—but he should do them equitably, which is obviously not the case.

In this apt characterization of a state that is selectively paternalistic, the “father” who promises fairness is guilty of betraying his children’s expectations—possibly by privileging some of the siblings at the expenses of others. This sentiment calls into question a fiscal contract that, on one hand, is appreciated for the services and benefits it promises, while, on the other hand, it is perceived as being frequently broken by an untrustworthy state and the citizens it seems to favor. For those who have honed the perception of being constantly cheated of social rights and services for which they (literally) pay profusely, even the opportunity to extend solidarity across the social spectrum becomes haunted by suspicions and revanchist comparisons: comparisons that are all the more envious when compounded with the ascription of racial and ethnic differences and the ensuing denial of belonging.

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Endnotes

¹ http://www.beppegrillo.it/2006/07/chi_evade_le_ta_1/index.html#comments. Accessed on March 25, 2009.

² “Pressione fiscale, l’Italia sesta fra i paesi industrializzati” (no author, *Repubblica*, October 15, 2008, at <http://www.repubblica.it/2008/09/sezioni/economia/fisco-evasione/press-ocse/press-ocse.html>, accessed on October 15, 2008.

³ “Niente voto agli evasori fiscali recidivi,” *l’Espresso*, February 26, 2009, at <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/2059587>, accessed on May 19, 2009.

⁴ “Una lotteria per premiare chi segnala gli evasori,” *l’Espresso* April 24, 2009, at <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/premiare-chi-segnala-gli-evasori/2079925&ref=hpstr2>, accessed on May 12, 2009.

⁵ Conservative leader Silvio Berlusconi owns the majority of Italy’s private television channels. When he serves as Prime Minister (which, at the time of writing in 2010, he has already done three times), Berlusconi also exercises a tight control on Italy’s three public television channels.

⁶ Agitating the specter of ethnic divisions as he panders to his North Italian electorates, Bossi often inveighs against a “Roman” state administration that has been allegedly co-opted by Southern Italians. As a deft tax minimizer (Maurer 2007) who has managed to recast fiscal avoidance as a form of prudent financial management (Palan 2003:67), Berlusconi, instead, has opted for an only slightly less inflammatory rhetoric, occasionally reminding his electorate that it is “normal” for overtaxed citizens to exercise the option of evasion.

⁷ This article is based on informal conversations, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with 31 fixed-income and self-employed taxpayers. Several of the interviews spanned many sessions over a number of years. Fieldwork for this project was conducted in Genoa, a northwestern city hosting a heterogeneous mosaic of perspectives that speak to several of the many threads running through contemporary Italian political discourse. Known as “*il meridione del nord*” (the south of northern Italy) for the comparatively high unemployment and poverty rates that ensued from its de-industrialization in the late 1970s, Genoa is a historically blue-collar, and now largely tertiarized, city (Cavalli 1965; Arvati 1988). Its electorate is predominantly left-leaning; however, conservative parties can count on vocal supporters, whom they recruit mainly among the local bourgeoisie, professionals, and business owners as well as disgruntled former communists. While I am well aware of the lack of a unified “Italian” stance on the state (Agnew 2002), my inevitably local, and inevitably situated engagement seeks to highlight some standpoints as well as discursive contributions to the narratives of the social contract that crisscross the peninsula, frequently converging even as they interrupt each other. Following Akhil Gupta’s (1995: 214) close attention to the mediatized contexts through which the state is discursively constructed, my analysis also includes an exploration of relevant Italian media: especially, though not exclusively, the interactive arenas provided by internet blogs and forums.

⁸ Framed as a failure of solidarity and trust, the focus on the lack of cohesiveness in Italian society is a theme that, historically, has characterized much US-based liberal scholarship inspired by a blend of Tocquevillean principles, modernization theory, and a good dose of ethnocentrism. Operating from within this paradigm, US political scientists like Edward Banfield (1958), Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963), and Robert Putnam (1993) have described Italy (especially the south) as the cradle of a lethargic, familistic, and uncooperative citizenry. Theirs is the portrait of a particularistic, (un)civil society that is strikingly unable to pick itself up by the bootstraps and rise to the heights of US advancement: not enough associationism, thus goes the diagnosis, and not enough mutual trust (see also Fukuyama 1995). What is remarkable about these studies is that the Italian state, in their narratives, is either absent (Banfield 1958; Almond and Verba 1963), or it is a somewhat marginal player that awaits the awakening of an associational civil society capable of fending for itself (Putnam 1993).

⁹ For recent journalistic reports on political corruption, conflict of interests, nepotism and clientelism in Italy, see Rizzo and Stella (2007), Rizzo (2010), as well as the works by investigative journalist Marco Travaglio.

¹⁰ Even though an in-dept ethnography of the bureaucratic experience is beyond the scope of this article, it should suffice here to mention that, as they go about their everyday life, Italian citizens are required to engage in a thick traffic of documents meant to prove anything from their “existence in life” (*esistenza in vita*) to their “healthy and robust constitution” (*sana e robusta costituzione*). Engulfed in the task of interpreting and applying a body of 150,000 laws (Foot 2003:76-99), the public administration keeps implementing the authoritarian Fascist theodicy (Hannerz 1993) of the primacy of the state over the society it is called to regulate (Cassese 1998:59). In turn, exasperated citizens may respond by seeking to bend the rules with the help of well-connected friends and patrons (Pardo 1996).

¹¹ The Italian state’s contradictory stand on the practice of evasion among Italy’s self-employed dates back to the 1980s: this is when, as Italy’s industrial sector kept withering, the ensuing proliferation of small businesses and family firms seemed to be a viable solution to rising unemployment rates (Cantaro 1990: 32; Ginsborg 2003:50-51; McCarthy 1995: 125-126). Trickle in from Ronald Reagan’s America and Margaret Thatcher’s United Kingdom, the North Atlantic rhetoric about the benefits of an unbridled free market (Harvey 2005: 7-8) persuaded subsequent Italian governments that a lenient approach in the face of less than transparent business practices would benefit the Italian economy, and hence society as a whole (Cantaro 1990; Ginsborg 2003). Since then, tax evasion among business owners and professionals has reached record levels (Ginsborg 2003, Ferrera 1996, Koenig Archibugi 2003; Sani 1989).

¹² The town name is fictional.

¹³ As of April 7, 2010, the site had collected information on evasion in the amount of € 17,524,372.11.

¹⁴ “Nemmeno un Euro all’Abruzzo, ho già dato”. *Il Secolo XIX*, April 18, 2009.

¹⁵ <http://informazioneesenzafiltro.blogspot.com/2009/04/ma-io-per-il-terremoto-non-do-nemmeno.html>; <http://www.siciliainformazioni.com/giornale/cronaca/49168/terremoto-larticolo-giacomo-girolamo.htm>, <http://politicaesocieta.blogosfere.it/2009/04/terremoto-in-abruzzo-su-facebook-zero-euro-giacomo-di-girolamo-e-labuso-di-solidarieta.html>, <http://blogosfere.it/2009/04/giacomo-di-girolamo-un-terremoto-su-facebook-labruzzo-dellabuso-di-solidarieta.html>, <http://www.comedonchisciotte.org/site/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=5782>; <http://www.cloroclero.com/?p=794>; accessed on April 21, 2009.

¹⁶ Aside from resonating with a Keynesian culture of rights, Di Girolamo’s words were taken all the more seriously since writer Roberto Saviano, who had been forced to go into hiding after publishing his *Gomorra* (2006) report on organized crime in Naples, cautioned from the pages of national daily *Repubblica* that the criminal organization known as camorra was already poised to intercept the public aid meant for the reconstruction of Abruzzi (“La ricostruzione a rischio clan. Ecco il partito del terremoto,” by Roberto Saviano, April 14, 2009, at <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/04/sezioni/cronaca/sisma-aquila-5/saviano/saviano.html>, accessed on April 21, 2009). The warning sounded realistic, since camorra had already been able to profiteer greatly from the reconstruction process that had taken place after the 1980 earthquake in Irpinia (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Chubb 2002).

¹⁷ At the dawn of unification, a modicum of social protection was exercised through Church charities and Socialist associationism. At the turn of the 20th century, Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti established the first principles of welfare for the sake of integration as well as social control. Later on, the Fascist state expanded its grip on society by granting benefits to select social and occupational categories (Ferrera 1984; Quine 2002; Van Kerserberger 1995).

¹⁸ “Indovina chi é l’ultimo?” <http://leganordbasilicatamanifestievolantini.blogspot.com/>, also at <http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/archives/politics/>, (“Lega Nord”). Both sites were accessed on April 21, 2009.

¹⁹ In 2008, a similar kind of revanchism was also successfully tapped by conservative politician Daniela Santanché. After leaving the post-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale party, Santanché created a new conservative party (La Destra-Fiamma Tricolore: The Right – Tricolor Flame) whose platform included, among others, “national preference... in schools of any grade, starting with daycare and kindergarten,” as well as in the assignment of public housing. In the parliamentary elections of April 2008, Santanché’s Destra earned 2.4% of the electorate—not a small feat for a party that was just a few weeks old. See “Programma elettorale” at http://www.danielasantanche.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/programma_elettorale.pdf, accessed on February 15, 2009.

²⁰ The difference in the discourse on public health care in Italy and the US is a case in point. At the time of writing, for example, that of a potential tax hike is one of the many deterrents that Republican Party activists are using in order to undermine support for the expansion of the health care system in

the US. Conversely, most Italian conservatives never question the need for public health care. What they seek to do, instead, is to deny access to immigrants for the sake of conserving resources for those whom they regard as legitimate users.

²¹ As Eisaku Ide and Sven Steinmo (2009) pointed out, lack of trust in how a state spends taxpayers' moneys is likely to undermine consent to the fiscal contract.